The right-wing political record of Bernie Sanders

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When Bernie Sanders, the nominally independent “socialist” senator from Vermont, announced last month that he would seek the Democratic Party nomination, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented that this marked “a new stage in one of the longest-running political frauds in American history.” This characterization is completely born out by a review of Sanders' political biography, which spans over four decades.

Born in Brooklyn to middle-class Jewish parents in 1941, Sanders came of age in a solidly liberal milieu during the heyday of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. His older brother Larry helped campaign for Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson as a member of the Young Democrats in the 1950s, and it was he who Sanders says gave him his earliest political education.

Sanders first became politically active after transferring to the University of Chicago in his second year of college. There, he became involved in the student radicalism then emerging, becoming a leader of the campus chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and leading a sit-in outside the university president's office in 1962. The next year he worked on the re-election campaign of a Democratic city councilman in Chicago, and graduated with a degree in political science in 1964.

However, his career in bourgeois politics began in earnest in Vermont in the 1970s, when Sanders became one of the leading spokesmen for the Liberty Union Party. The party was founded in 1971 by Bill Meyer, who in 1958 had been the first Democrat elected to the House of Representatives from Vermont since the Civil War, serving one term. After being defeated for reelection by a Republican, he had fallen out of favor, failing three times to win the Democratic nomination for US Senator, most recently in 1970. He formed the Liberty Union Party the following year as an antiwar formation to the left of the state Democratic Party, attempting to capitalize on the protest movement of the middle class that was then at its height.

The party, although tiny and politically amorphous, found a certain response in 1970s Vermont. The state was changing significantly, with an influx of new residents, most from New York City and other east coast metropolitan centers, attracted by the prospect escaping the tensions of the cities for life in a rural area only short distance away. Sanders was himself part of this “hippie invasion,” as some called it: shortly after graduating from the University of Chicago, he bought a summer home in Middlesex, a small town in Central Vermont, before leaving Brooklyn for Vermont entirely in the tumultuous year 1968. “I liked nature, I wanted to live in the country,” he later explained. “I had absolutely no intention of becoming involved in politics.”

The Liberty Union Party, like countless other middle-class organizations, had no coherent political program or perspective outside of a vague commitment to social reform, which it was pleased to call “socialism.” As the *Boston Globe* put it in 1976, “there were nearly as many opinions as there were [party members].” Its political “accomplishments,” aside from attracting enough votes to quality for major party status, consisted of symbolic fig leafs from local government, such as the holding of hearings on utility rate increases and placing items on the agenda of various town hall meetings asking the state to consider nationalizing the state's electric utilities.

In the end, the party collapsed in the mid-70s, a victim of the demise of the anti-war movement, which had a broad demoralizing effect on the middle class radical milieu. Sanders, speaking to the *Globe* shortly after leaving the party, expressed both the ennui and political narrowness of this outlook:

“'I have done as much as I can,' said Sanders, who volunteered that he is an admirer of Fidel Castro. 'My feeling is that I had remained we'd have gotten just as many votes. But if I can't see growth …' His voice trails off and he shrugs.'”

Sanders ran for public office again in 1981, this time as an independent, for mayor of Burlington, the largest city in Vermont with around 37,000 residents at the time. This time, he jettisoned his former association with the “socialist” politics of the Liberty Union Party in order to avoid antagonizing the city's business interests.

Although he continued to be routinely described in the press as an “avowed socialist,” he did not portray himself as such during the campaign, preferring instead the more amorphous term “radical,” and his opponent, Democratic incumbent Gordon Pacquette, declined to make an issue of it. “I've stayed away from calling myself a socialist because I did not want to spend half my life explaining that I did not believe in the Soviet Union or in concentration camps,” Sanders explained at the time.

Sanders was so successful in achieving a measure of establishment respectability that he even received the endorsement of the Burlington police union, which supported Reagan in the 1980 elections. “He seemed to have some new ideas for some of this city's old problems, like juvenile delinquency,” union president Joseph Crepeau explained.

After winning the race by a mere 10 votes, Sanders set to work reassuring the city's business community. “I'm not going to war with the city's financial and business community and I know that there is little I can do from City Hall to accomplish my dreams for society,” Sanders proclaimed. As the *New York Times* observed, “Sanders undertook ambitious downtown revitalization projects and courted evil capitalist entities known as 'businesses.' He balanced budgets. His administration sued the local cable franchise and won reduced rates for customers. He drew a minor-league baseball team to town, the Vermont Reds (named for the Cincinnatis, not the Commies).”

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Sanders also won praise for his auditing of the city's pension plan for the first time in three decades, and initiated a $100 million redevelopment project of the city's waterfront, opposed by tenants' organizations in the surrounding neighborhood, funded by a combination of federal grants and private investors.

At the same time as he was wooing Burlington business with his fiscal responsibility, enabling him to win three additional two year terms as mayor, Sanders shored up his credentials among petty bourgeois radicals with largely symbolic measures. He traveled to the Soviet Union and Cuba on good-will trips, invited members of the Irish Republican Army to City Hall, and spoke out in favor of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. He pursued sister-city status for Burlington with a coastal town in Nicaragua and the Soviet city of Yaroslavl.

When Burlington business interests and radical posturing came into conflict, Sanders came down unhesitatingly on the side his bread was buttered on. One former supporter, in a recent letter to socialistworker.org, describes how Central American solidarity activists picketed the General Electric factory in Burlington that manufactured machineguns used in military helicopters against peasant guerrillas: “I vividly remember Bernie standing arms-folded alongside the right-wing union officials from the factory and the Burlington Police Department as we were being arrested. He falsely insinuated that we were ‘anti-worker,’ and he refused to have any serious political dialogue with us activists.”

In 1990 Sanders ran for the House of Representatives, defeating an incumbent Republican and a Democrat in a three-way race. During congressional deliberations over authorizing the first Gulf War, Sanders declared his support for sanctions, diplomatic pressure and even the use of US forces to “pressure” Iraq into submission, while stopping, along with most congressional Democrats, just short of voting for the actual war. This caveat was dropped in 1993, when Sanders voted for US intervention in Somalia. Sanders then voted for the NATO air war against Serbia in 1999.

This embrace of “human rights” imperialism was part of a worldwide phenomenon among layers formerly associated with the student and middle class radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s. Especially following the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-1991, these layers moved rapidly towards an accommodation with imperialism.

The NATO interventions in the Balkans in particular were a turning point in this respect, beginning with the bombing of Serb positions in Bosnia, the dispatch of UN peacekeeping troops, and then the 1999 war over Kosovo. The German Green Party, which carried out savage austerity measures as part of the “Red Green” coalition at the end of the decade, threw its support for German participation in the NATO war against Serbia, the first foreign deployment of the German army since the end of World War II, under the guise of “human rights.” Sanders followed a similar path. (His older brother Larry, who emigrated to Great Britain, ran as a candidate of the British Greens in the 2015 parliamentary elections).

Sanders voted in 2001 for the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the congressional resolution that was the basis of George Bush’s invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the launching of the “war on terror,” and which is still cited by Barack Obama as the legal justification for drone-missile assassinations in Pakistan, Yemen and other countries. He regularly voted for military appropriations bills, required to fund the ongoing war in Iraq Sanders claimed to oppose.

In the sphere of world trade, Sanders masks a strident chauvinism with “human rights” rhetoric, particularly with respect to China. In 1992 he co-sponsored a bill, first proposed by Nancy Pelosi, and later vetoed by George H.W. Bush, attempting to restrict the trade status of China due to its human rights record. As always, the supreme “human right” was the right of American corporations to scour the globe in source of profit; one of the benchmarks that China would have been required to meet was to provide “United States exporters fair access to Chinese markets, including lowering tariffs, removing nontariff barriers, and increasing the purchase of United States goods and services.”

Sanders' stance on immigration is entirely in line with right-wing efforts to scapegoat millions of impoverished and exploited Hispanic workers for the falling living standards of American working class. He has repeatedly introduced bills in Congress calling for the suspension of the federal visa program under the guise of protecting American jobs. For his efforts, he has earned the admiration of noted anti-immigrant racist and talk show host Lou Dobbs, who called him “one of the few straight talkers in Congress.”

On the massive NSA spying first revealed by Edward Snowden, Sanders has staked out a position virtually indistinguishable from the public position of Barack Obama, “welcoming” the opportunity to “discuss” government spying while demanding that Snowden be punished for revealing it. “The information disclosed by Edward Snowden has been extremely important,” Sanders said in early 2014. "On the other hand, there is no debate that Mr. Snowden violated an oath and committed a crime,” for which he called only for a “lenient” sentence. Last July, Sanders co-sponsored the Obama-supported USA FREEDOM Act in the Senate, which would regularize NSA spying under the guise of regulating it.

For some 25 years, the only thing distinguishing Sanders from garden-variety liberal Democrats in the House and Senate was the “independent” label he espoused. One survey of his voting record in the House in the 1990s noted that he was more Catholic than the Pope: he voted more consistently with the Democratic caucus than the Democratic leader in the House at the time, Richard Gephardt.

The decision by Sanders to seek the Democratic Party nomination for president is the culmination of a protracted process over four decades, during which Sanders, despite never formally belonging to the Democratic Party, never ventured beyond what passes for the party's “left” flank, using the term “socialist” only to suggest an illusory difference with his (infrequent) Democratic Party challengers.

His role in the campaign will be use his reputation as a politician of the “left” to disguise the ever more right-wing orientation of the Democratic Party: its abandonment of even a nominal commitment to social reform, its embrace of war, assassination, mass surveillance and an increasingly dictatorial role for the American imperialist state, both internationally and at home.

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